

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the introduction by Senators Susan M. Collins (R-ME) and Charles E. Schumer (D-NY) of a resolution in the U.S. Senate calling for Secretary of State Colin L. Powell to designate Saudi Arabia a "country of particular concern." The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 requires this designation for countries that severely violate religious freedom. The resolution also calls on the government of Saudi Arabia to cease its support globally for a religious ideology that explicitly promotes hatred and intolerance.

"This resolution by Senators Collins and Schumer reinforces the Commission's recommendation that Saudi Arabia should be designated a 'country of particular concern' (CPC)

for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief," said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "While the State Department's 2003 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom again notes that freedom of religion 'does not exist' in Saudi Arabia, the country still has not been designated a CPC." The Commission began making CPC recommendations in 2000. Each year it has recommended Saudi Arabia be designated a CPC. Since 1999, when the State Department issued its first annual report on religious freedom, the Department has recognized that religious freedom 'does not exist' in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has never been designated a CPC. The Commission reiterated this recommendation during a June 16, 2004 meeting with Secretary Powell.

As the Senate resolution makes clear, the government of Saudi Arabia continues vigorously to enforce its ban on all forms of public religious expression other than the government's interpretation and presentation of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, often referred to as Wahhabism. This policy violates the rights of the large communities of non-Muslims and other Muslims from a variety of doctrinal schools of Islam who reside in Saudi Arabia, including Shi'a Muslims, who make up 8-10 percent of the population.

"Senators Collins and Schumer join USCIRF and a growing number of policy makers and experts, including the 9/11 Commission, calling for a greater emphasis in the U.S.-Saudi relationship on addressing Saudi support for extremism," said Bansal. In April, several Members of Congress, including Senator Collins, asked the General Accounting Office to undertake a USCIRF-recommended study to examine U.S. government efforts to identify and monitor sources of Saudi funding for institutions that advocate intolerance and violence, and what the U.S. government is doing to counter that influence. In June, an independent task force on terrorist financing at the Council on Foreign Relations endorsed the Commission's recommendation for the study, and called on the U.S. government to publicly acknowledge that serious human rights violations in Saudi Arabia are significant issues in the bilateral relationship.

A number of reports indicate that funding originating in Saudi Arabia has been used to finance activities that allegedly support religious intolerance, and, in some cases, violence. The 9/11 Commission's final report notes that Saudi Arabia funded organizations that propagate the Wahhabi doctrine have been exploited by extremists to further their goal of violence. The 9/11 Commission, along with the USCIRF, recommended that these and other problems in the U.S.-Saudi relationship be confronted openly

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

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